

Health groups join to help kids

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It's August and parents' thoughts are turning to buying clothes and school supplies for their kids.

And a group of healthcare organizations hopes parents are also considering their children's medical needs.

In an effort to underline insurance and health programs available to uninsured and underinsured Montanans, officials for those organizations held a "Covering Kids and Families" back-to-school kickoff Thursday.

A cluster of parents and children joined the morning gathering outside Deering Community Health Center's main door.

The event was sponsored by the Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies coalition of Helena. Mike Cooney, the coalition's executive director, said Montana has 20,000 children who do not have access to health care coverage. And most of those children are in families with working parents.

"A lot of programs out there can help these children," said Cooney, a former secretary of state.

He said Thursday's event was tied to the issue of children going back to school because when students are physically and mentally healthy, "it makes their ability to learn so much better."

Parents of insured children are more likely to seek early medical attention for their children, rather than seeking more expensive emergency care, Cooney said. Healthy children are more likely to grow up to be healthy adults, he said, and parents of healthy children are less likely to miss work.

Jan Pasternaud, supervisor at the Office of Public Assistance in Billings, said programs such as Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Plan (CHIP), can help meet the medical needs of children.

CHIP, a low-cost private health insurance plan, covers children up through age 18.

The program is funded mainly with federal dollars. Every dollar the state puts in is matched by \$4 federally.

A family of four can earn up to \$28,275 a year and still qualify for CHIP. Pasternaud acknowledged the program has a waiting list of 283 children.

That should not discourage parents from completing an application for the insurance, she said. "You never know when the program may be able to expand."

And slots in CHIP frequently open up, she said.

Joan Schaff, program coordinator for the Ronald McDonald Care Mobile, described the services of the mobile care center that provides short-term medical and dental care to children up through age 18.

Nearly 6,000 children have gotten treatment since the care mobile hit the road two years ago. The unit is staffed by a pediatrician, a dentist, a dental hygienist and a dental assistant.

Lil Anderson, CEO of the Yellowstone City/County Health Department, said these and other programs are available to children who have little or no health insurance.

Information about the programs are available by calling the health department at 247-3200.

Or, Cooney said, people can call a national number, (800) 421-6667 and be automatically transferred to the state CHIP office, where they can get all the information they need.

Cooney said Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies in the next few weeks will work with education groups to get information to parents about the many available health programs.

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